



THE CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES
OF THE FLATHEAD NATION

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A People of Vision

A Confederation of the Salish,
Pend d' Oreille
and Kootenai Tribes

House Human Services Committee
Honorable Art Wittich, Chairman
Honorable Ellie Boldman Hill, Vice Chair
Honorable Kirk Wagner, Vice Chair
64th Montana Legislature

March 11, 2015

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RE: HB 509 – Native American and rural youth suicide prevention pilot project

Chairman Wittich and Committee Members:

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes ("CSKT") strongly support HB 509, as it directly addresses the suicide epidemic among native and non-native youths in Montana.

Suicide might be an uncomfortable topic to discuss, but the statistics are too compelling to ignore. For the past 30 years, Montana has held the shameful distinction of being in the top five states nationwide for highest overall suicide rate.¹ For the past 10 years, suicide has been the second leading cause of death in Montana for youths aged 10–24.² Compared to the 2011 national rate for suicides among youths aged 15–24, the corresponding Montana rate was more than double.³

As alarming as those numbers are, the suicide rate among Montana's Native American youths is even higher than that of their non-native counterparts.⁴ During the 12 months preceding the latest Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey in 2013, 4.7 percent of all Montana high school students had made at least one suicide attempt.⁵ However, this figure was over double for their Native American counterparts, at 9.59 percent.⁶

Suicide is an epidemic on every reservation and rural area of Montana, and its causes are varied and complex. This is why the proposed prevention pilot project under HB 509 is such a critical undertaking at this time. The current statewide program has been insufficient to reduce suicide rates on reservations. The existing programs need to be adapted to fit each tribe's cultural aspects and social circumstances.

HB 509 represents an urgently needed proactive approach to the suicide epidemic among Montana's youths. We thank Representative Casey Schreiner for acknowledging that this problem exists and is worthy of our time and efforts. The CSKT urge this committee's support of this bill and positive action upon it.

Respectfully submitted,

Vernon S. Finley, Chairman
Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

¹ Suicide Prevention in Montana, Legislative Update, Montana DPHHS 2015 Strategic Suicide Prevention Plan.

² Suicide Prevention in Montana page 4 of 11, Legislative Update.

³ 2011 National Vital Statistics Reports (June, 2014); Montana Office of Epidemiology and Scientific Support (August, 2014); Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey (July, 2013).

⁴ Morgan Brown, State's Suicide Rate Among Tops in the Nation, Montana State News, Feb. 15, 2015.

⁵ 2013 Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey High School Results, Montana Office of Public Instruction, page page 18, available at <http://www.opi.mt.gov/pdf/YRBS/13/13FinalRpt.pdf>.

⁶ 2013 Montana Youth Risk Behavior Survey, Montana Office of Public Instruction, page 7, available at http://www.opi.mt.gov/pdf/YRBS/13/13FreqDistNatAmReservation_HS.pdf.